

Trial of Jakarta governor signals wider political turmoil in Indonesia

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The trial of Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama on trumped-up charges of “blasphemy” is underway in a Jakarta district court, after mass protests last year, spearheaded by right-wing Islamist organisations, demanded his jailing. The case is based on the allegation that Basuki insulted the Muslim Quran and Islam. This is a crime in Indonesia, under regressive pro-clerical laws, punishable by up to five years’ jail.

Basuki, who took over as Jakarta governor in October 2014 after his predecessor Joko Widodo became Indonesian president, is seeking election in his own right in the upcoming gubernatorial election on February 15. The alleged offence occurred last September when Basuki, who is a Christian and an ethnic Chinese, cited a verse from the Quran in a bid to counter Islamic groups that are urging Muslims not to vote for a non-Muslim.

The trial is a sign of sharpening rivalry among Indonesia’s political elites, amid economic uncertainty compounded by the election of Donald Trump as US president and a widening social gulf between rich and poor. The campaign against Basuki is certainly seeking to undermine his chances at the February election, but is also aimed more broadly at Widodo, who groomed Basuki and who is due for re-election in 2019.

Various hardline Islamist groups, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), initiated the campaign against Basuki in 2014 shortly after he became Jakarta governor. These organisations seized on Basuki’s remarks last September to demand his dismissal and jailing. The protests in Jakarta grew to more than 100,000 on November 4, ending in riots that killed one person and injured more than 200, and an even larger rally on December 2.

Basuki’s rivals for the Jakarta governorship have kept their distance from the protests, but are undoubtedly offering tacit support to the Islamist groups. After the November rally, President Widodo accused “political

actors” of manipulating the protests but did not name names.

Prabowo Subianto, Widodo’s opponent in the 2014 presidential election, had his party Gerindra and its ally, the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), endorse Anies Baswedan, sacked by Widodo as education minister.

Widodo’s predecessor as president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and his Democratic Party (PD) formed a coalition with the three Muslim-based parties—the United Development Party (PPP), the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the National Awakening Party (PKB)—to endorse his son, former army major Agus Harmurti Yudhoyono.

Yudhoyono senior called a press conference after the November protest to refute allegations that he orchestrated the mass rally but at the same time declared that he supported the demonstration “300 percent.” Earlier, he remarked that the Jakarta poll now “feels like a presidential election”—an indication of the broader aims of the campaign.

Basuki, who had indicated last March that he would run as an independent, accepted the nomination in July of three parties in Widodo’s parliamentary coalition—Golkar, the political instrument of the former Suharto dictatorship, NasDem, the party of media mogul Surya Paloh and Hanura, the party of Suharto-era general Wiranto, Widodo’s top security minister. He also gained the support of ex-President Megawati Sukarnoputri and her Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which had been seeking another candidate.

Basuki’s trial and likely conviction has now thrown the February election open and placed a question mark over Widodo’s chances in the 2019 presidential election. In a bid to distance himself from his protégé, Widodo made a surprise appearance on the platform at the December 2 protest alongside leaders of the FPI and other hardline

Islamists—effectively lending legitimacy to their campaign.

The case against Basuki has been greatly accelerated. In procedures that normally take months, Basuki was named a suspect on November 16, police submitted the case to the Attorney General's Office by November 25 and within three days the AGO declared the 826-page dossier complete.

When the trial opened on December 13, Basuki denied he had intended to insult the Quran. On December 27, the five-judge panel ruled against defence submissions to have the case thrown out because it violated Basuki's human rights and breached procedures. When proceedings began last week, the judges barred journalists from the court, which was surrounded by 2,500 security personnel, amid pro- and anti-Basuki protests.

The moves against Basuki, and indirectly Widodo, reflect divisions in the Indonesian ruling elites over economic policy. Both men are identified with efforts to accelerate pro-market restructuring, whereas Widodo's rival in the 2014 election, Prabowo Subianto, campaigned on economic nationalism and protectionism.

Widodo slashed fuel subsidies in 2014, provoking widespread anger as petrol and diesel prices rose by more than 30 percent. His plans to use the income to boost social spending and expand jobs through infrastructure projects have not lived up to promises. Domestic consumption and government spending, which together comprise almost 70 percent of overall economic output, are stagnating.

As a result, there are concerns in Jakarta that the Indonesian economy could be hit if the incoming Trump administration in Washington implements trade war measures. The United States is Indonesia's biggest export destination, accounting for more than 12 percent of overall exports. The government has downgraded its economic growth estimate for 2017 to 5.1 percent, well short of its target of 7 percent.

At the same time, Indonesia increasingly depends on foreign direct investment (FDI) from China, which is now the third-biggest investor behind Singapore and Japan, with FDI rising to \$US1.6 billion in the nine months up to the end of September from about \$US600 million for the whole of 2015. Widodo has courted Chinese investment, meeting five times with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the past two years.

Islamist leaders have not only branded Basuki an infidel but also sought to whip up anti-Chinese chauvinism, which has been repeatedly exploited by Indonesian

political figures since independence to channel social tensions in reactionary directions.

While the Indonesian gross domestic product expanded dramatically from \$US163.8 billion in 1999 to \$888.5 billion in 2014, the economic benefits have enriched a relatively small layer of the population and social inequality has widened.

A December 2015 World Bank report found that in 2002 the top 10 percent of households consumed as much as the poorest 42 percent, but by 2014 the richest households consumed as much as the poorest 54 percent. The growing national wealth has benefited only 20 percent of the population while 80 percent—some 205 million people—are worse off.

Among the G20 nations, Indonesia now ranks second only to Russia in income inequality. One percent of the population owns half of all property and financial assets and 10 percent own 77 percent of national wealth. The official poverty level of 11 percent or 29 million people is a sham. The World Bank stated that another 68 million lived just above the poverty line and could easily fall below it with any financial shock.

Likewise, Basuki's efforts to "modernise" Jakarta, while appealing to layers of the capital's middle classes and enriching a layer of businessmen, have provoked anger from the city's poorest layers. His land reclamation projects have benefited only developers and their clients hungry for coastal sites, while, in 2015 alone, Basuki oversaw the eviction of 8,145 poor families.

The Islamist organisations behind the anti-Basuki campaign, along with various opposition parties and factions, are seeking to exploit the growing social discontent for their own reactionary agenda and, above all, to divide the working class and block any challenge to the profit system itself.



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